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### STEPS SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN TAKE NOW TO REDUCE THE BURDEN OF SCHOOL MEALS VERIFICATION IN THE FUTURE

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 made changes to the certification and verification processes for free and reduced-price school meals that result in new requirements for state child nutrition agencies and school districts.

Implementing the steps below will require an initial investment of staff and resources, but over time will reduce verification paperwork, improve program integrity, and connect low-income children to the free or reduced-price meals for which they qualify.

#### **Reduce the Size of the Verification Pool**

Categorical Eligibility: Effective July 2004, all homeless, runaway, and migrant children are categorically eligible for free meals once identified by a homeless education liaison, shelter director, migrant education coordinator, or other appropriate official. Once identified, such children do not have to submit an application to receive free meals and are not subject to verification.

Direct Certification: School districts are required to directly certify children in households receiving food stamp benefits when the household returns the letter from the Department of Public Health and Human Services to the district. When a child is directly certified, the household is not subject to verification.

Central Application Filing: School districts should file all family applications in one central location rather than maintaining records in multiple locations.

- Example: A district has 100 family applications that include 250 students in three schools.
  - With central applications, the district must verify three applications ( $100 \times .03 = 3$ ).
  - With applications in each school, the district may have 85 applications in the elementary school, 50 applications in the middle school and 25 applications in the high school. The district must verify three applications in the elementary school, two applications in the middle school and one application in the high school to total six applications.

*"It is the mission of the Office of Public Instruction to improve teaching and learning through communication, collaboration, advocacy, and accountability to those we serve."*

## Qualify for Reduced Verification Requirements

Recognizing that changes to the verification process would call for extra efforts to strengthen program integrity and program access, the legislation includes administrative relief for school districts that are able to obtain verification information for a relatively high portion of students selected for eligibility verification. *The results of the verification process this school year will determine which school districts qualify for administrative relief next school year.*

School districts will qualify for reduced verification requirements (i.e., same as current requirements – choose to verify 3 percent random sample or a 1 percent focused sample) during the 2005-06 school year if it achieves a response rate of 80 percent or higher (i.e., a non-response rate of less than 20 percent) during the 2004-05 school year.

In Montana, most school districts will need to obtain a 100 percent response rate during the fall 2004 verification process to qualify for the reduced verification requirements. For districts with fewer than 134 family applications, one non-response will result in more than 80 percent of applications verified.

- Example: A district has 133 applications and one non-response to the verification request.

The district must verify four applications ( $133 \times .03 = 3.99$ )

3 applications verified

4 applications selected

75 percent response rate

***School districts are strongly encouraged to conduct aggressive follow-up to get 100 percent response rate during the fall 2004 verification process.***